

[Mr. Fermin Souto]

26086

LIFE HISTORY

of

MR. FERMIN SOUTO (1)

I was born in the little village of “[Perrol?] de Galicia”, Spain in June of [1858?]. I have reached the advanced age of 77 years. My father was a stone-cutter, toiling from sun up until night. My mother was born and raised in the country. I am, therefore a plebeian. My parents were poor people, and in those days a poor man could only look forward to very meagre education. This was the education that I acquired. I never obtained a degree or title of any kind. I was especially interested in Universal History and Geography. These were my pet studies.

On October 30th of 1870, a friend took me to Havana, Cuba, although usually the people from Galicia (my province) went to Argentina and Uruguay; while the Asturianos and those from the region of Santander went to Cuba. I was then only twelve years of age. This friend put me to work, at that tender age, in a hat factory situated in Monte Street No. 165. I was very badly treated during the time I worked at this place. Part of my duties consisted in going every day to a coal-yard and fetch coal with which to heat the flat irons. The owner of this coal-yard was a kind and sympathetic man. I made him a confidant of all my troubles,

(1.) Mr. Souto is Secretary of the Centro Espanol (Spanish Club).

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telling him of the ill treatment I was receiving at the hat factory. This man had a nephew who owned a variety store in the town of Santiago de las Vegas, some seventeen miles from Havana. One day, to my immense joy, he took me there to work for his nephew. In a comparative short time I knew everyone in town, and was much esteemed by all. Here I passed the best years of my life.

It was the custom of the owner of this variety store to purchase old newspapers at a very low price. With these newspapers he would wrap the different articles that were sold. I remember that I used to dig into this pile of old newspapers, reading avidly every scrap of news I could find. One day, while looking over these newspapers, I came upon a very old number of the “[Baceta?] de la Havana” (Gazette of Havana) in which I found many interesting articles of the Civil War of the United States, depicting the various battles that had been fought between the North and the South. From then on I would seek every bit of news from the United States, reading with the keenest interest anything about Washington or Lincoln, in fact anything I could get a hold of that dealt with the United States.

I remember well a song in Spanish that once appeared in a newspaper, and which I memorized word for word: (I was then eighteen years of age.) 3 SONG TO WASHINGTON
I remember when very young a beautiful forehead I saw, A man standing near your image, one day I disclosed, Candid, ignorant, with stuttering lips: “Who is he?” I asked, “His name I implore.” And while with his right your image he showed, With radiant joy, his face to me he turned. With sonorous accents, that pride denoted: “That is Washington.” he said, “for him I am free today.”

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At about this time I met a cigar-maker by the name of Don Federico, who had been in New York for many years. I told him that I was very desirous of going to the United States, but did not know what to do, for although I should be able to save a little money, what was I to do in New York when this money gave out, not even knowing how to speak English. He

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then told me that the best thing I could do was to learn how to make cigars. In that manner I could easily find work in New York. I, therefore, decided to learn the trade, and come to the United States.

When I imparted my decision to the owner of the variety store, he told me that it was pure foolhardiness, that the cigar-makers were always needy, and that I should remove such a foolish idea from my head. He took who thing hard, but nothing daunted me. I went to see a cigar manufacturer, who was a friend of mine, in Santiago de las Vegas, and he told me that I must pledge myself to work two years as an apprentice. There and 4 then I signed the contract, and bent my energies to the learning of the cigar business. As soon as I left the variety store, the owner closed that store and another branch he had.

At the end of the two years I was well versed in the cigar industry. It was about this time that I came across a friend of mine, who had been a co-worker with me at the variety store. He was at that time planning on setting up a general variety store, and asked me if I would go to work with him. I foresaw that this was the very thing I needed in order to obtain sufficient funds for my trip to New York. I worked one year and eleven months at this place, during which time I saved everything I could.

(1) Recuerdo que my nino, a un hombre vi la frente, delante de tu imagen un dia descubri. Y candido, ignorante, con labios balbucientes: "Quien es" ose decirle, "su nombre puedo oir?" Y en tanto que su diestra tu imagen sanalaba, con jubilo radiante, su rostro a mi volvio; Y con sonoro acento, quo orgullo demostraba: "Es Washington," me dido, "per el soy libre yo."

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Another thing that proved favorable to me was that Mr. Diego Lopez Trujillo was established in New York City, operating a small cigar factory. He had been a resident of Santiago de las Vegas, so I procured myself with a recommendation to him. As soon as I

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reached New York City (the place of my dreams) I was employed by Mr. Trujillo, and my worries for the present were over.

One of the first things I did was to become a citizen of my chosen country. My citizenship papers were issued on October 13th, 1886. (1)

It was in this same year that I married the daughter of Mr. Diego Lopez Trujillo. We had three children in New York: two daughters and one son. Of these, two died: a girl and a boy. The little girl died of scarlet fever, due to a very/ crowded apartment house, which my brother had chosen for me. For several days we were unable to bury her due to a terrible blizzard, and a great amount of snow that had fallen. We had to wait until the railroad tracks between Broadway and Williamsburg to Cypress Hill Cemetery had been cleared.

(1.) Mr. Souto showed me the citizenship paper approved by the Court of Common Pleas of New York City, a very old document showing yellow in some places. Then he carefully refolded it, and placed it back in the safe of the Spanish Club.

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The reader can well imagine the anguish we went through seeing our little daughter in state day in and day out. The boy died when he was teething.

Shortly after my marriage, my father-in-law moved his little factory to Key West. There, fortune smiled at his constant efforts, and he built one of the largest factories in Key West. He became immensely rich.

In the year 1889 there was a great epidemic of "flu in New York City. It spread like wild fire throughout the city. My wife contracted the disease, and as a result her lungs were seriously affected. Due to her condition I found it impossible to allow her to remain in New York City during the winter months, so I took advantage of an invitation from my father-in-law to come to Key West with my wife and only remaining daughter and pass the winters there, as the climate was very temperate.

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Upon my arrival in Key West with my wife and little daughter, I found that a strike had been declared in all the cigar factories. The cigar-makers were demanding \$1.00 increase per thousand on the cigar brands, and also that a Regulation Committee be appointed. Seeing this state of affairs, and realizing that if I remained there I would be living off my father-in-law, I decided to return to New York, and leave my wife and daughter in Key West, until winter was over.

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On my way to New York, however, I passed through Tampa, and noted that everyone was well satisfied and working hard. Here I found an old friend of mine from New York, Mr. Enrique Pendas of the factory of Lozano Pendas & Co. Talking with him, he showed me the many advantages in Tampa, and prevailed upon me to remain. I, therefore, decided to stay here and work for Mr. Pendas. When winter was over, I went back to Key West for my family, and from there returned to New York City. There I went to work at the principal factory of Mr. Enrique Pendas which was situated on Pearl Street. Several years afterwards, however, Mr. Pendas removed that factory, and enlarged the one in Tampa.

In the winter of 1890, my wife once more took sick, and I hurried her off to Key West. I remained alone in New York, and experienced the severest cold weather that I can remember. I would think of the wonderful winter I had passed in Tampa, and remember that while winter was at its worse in New York, the flowers bloomed here. I felt something akin to homesickness for Tampa, although I had spent only a few months here. One day while looking over the various things of my wife, and which goes to make a home, I decided that I would not remain another day in New York. I, therefore, wrote to my wife saying that I was leaving for Tampa; bade "good-bye" to all my friends in New York, and arrived here in January of 1891. Since then I have remained here for good.

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I am surrounded here by friends, even the “paving stones” in all Ybor City know me. My wife was finally cured here. She presented me with another son here, who is now 31 years old.

My daughter was married here and has three sons. The oldest is working for Lykes Brothers; another one has a poultry market; and the youngest is studying radio. They do not loiter about the streets, smoking cigarettes and using profane language, like most of the youths of today in Ybor City. They earn what they eat. They have been brought up properly.

My son, who was born in Tampa, is married and has three small boys. He works at the factory of Santaella as picker, and is much esteemed there.

I worked at the factory of Lozano Pendas & Co., up to the time the factory was consumed by fire.

In New York I had been working with Mr. Cuesta, Mr. Ray, Mr. Santaella and several others. They had been cigar-makers. Since then the above mentioned men became great cigar manufacturers in Tampa.

When the factory of Lozano Pendas & Co. has been destroyed by fire, I went to work with Mr. Cuesta. He was then part owner of the Cuesta-Ballard & Co. which was situated where Hav-a-Tampa is today located: corner 22nd Street and 10th Avenue. While working here the cigar-makers requested that I read (1) to them, I took up these

(1.) A reader at the cigar factory is one who reads novels, stories, newspapers, etc., while the cigar-makers are working. It was instructive and educational, yet the manufacturers abolished it. The cigar-makers went on strike but lost. It was abolished November 27, 1931.

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duties willingly, making cigars part time and reading at other times. I used to translate for them the "New York Herald ", "The Citizen " of Jacksonville, and "The Tampa Daily Times "
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Later Mr. Cuesta separated from Mr. Ballard, setting up a cigar factory with Mr. Ray in West Tampa. I went with Mr. Cuesta and worked for him for over twenty years, reading, translating and making cigars, all within the days work.

A grout friendship sprung between Mr. Cuesta and myself, a friendship that had started in New York. Although he is now very old, feeble, and barely able to get around, he comes to the Spanish Club in his car to see me. As he is unable to get out of the car without help, he usually sends in the chauffeur to let me know that he is here. I then go out and have a nice little chat with him.

I was appointed Secretary of the Centro Espanol in the year 1900, and served until 1906. In 1906 I went back to work at the cigar factory. However, in 1916 I was again recalled to the Spanish Club. Since then I have held this position permanently. (1)

I have a brother, now 70 years of age, living at Falls Village, Connecticut. He is a true Yankee, and a great admirer of Mr. Roosevelt.

I have always dressed within my means, or in other words, I wear only that for which I am able to pay, not like many who go about dressed like a "millionaire", without a cent in their pocket and owing money to every store in Tampa.

(1.) Mr. Souto is considered by many as "Fermin, the Secretary without an equal".

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Upwards of \$2,000,000 have passed through my hands since I have been Secretary of the Centro Espanol, and although it has never been requested of me, I have placed myself under bond with two companies.

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Many of our members are unable to pay their monthly fee, as they are not working. However, we do not cast him aside because the effects of the depression have reached him. We administer medical aid and medicine whenever he is sick. The receipts unpaid of the Club sum up to \$2,997. "The Section de Propaganda", a department of the Club that takes care of investigating all unpaid receipts, paying the receipts of those who are out of work, has paid nearly all of the above sum, and having a balance now of \$949.00.

On March 27th we paid for doctors and help at the Sanatorium as follows:

Doctors\$1,381.66 (1)

Employees of the Sanatorium..... 538.00 \$1,909.66

It will be noted that I paid this amount four days before the end of the month.

Many of the members have so much faith in me that they give me their money to sure for them. (2)

(1.) Of this amount Dr. Panielle receives \$575.00 monthly for his services as Medical Director. Other doctors and assistants receiving from \$75.00 to \$175.00.

(2.) Mr. Souto has asked me to insert the following clause of the Club:

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"The objects of this corporation shall be to render voluntary assistance and relief to all worthy members in case of misfortune or distress, to extend to them educational facilities, and to encourage and promote among them, and their families, recreation and social intercourse; but in no case shall any member be entitled to or receive any pecuniary gain or profit from any of the operations or transactions of the Corporation. Its principal office shall be in the City of Tampa, County of Hillsborough and the State of Florida, but its

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establishments for relief, recreation or entertainment may be located anywhere in the said county of Hillsborough.”

My personal opinion of the cigar industry is that it is going from bad to worse. If conditions are not remedied soon in Ybor City, we will soon be in the deplorable condition Key West found itself recently. The machineries for making cigars are at the root of all this evil. Over 600 women, who were employed as cigar banders, have been thrown out, due to the cigar banding machine. Countless numbers of cigar-maker are today unemployed due to cigar-making machines.

On the other hand, the cigar manufacturers here try to compete with the manufacturers of the North in the production of cheap cigars. At what cost, however, to the few Cuban and Spanish cigar-makers who are working. These expert cigar-makers are forced to work with the worst tobacco material obtainable. The manufacturers pay then a miserable wage in order to compete with the cheap cigars, produced by machineries, in those Northern cities.

The manufacturers are now purchasing only the small leaves from the lower stem of the tobacco plant, which is nothing but trash. A decent cigar cannot be made from such a small leaf. The purchase of the fine “vuelta-abajo” tobacco has reached such a low level that the government of Cuba is seriously considering the suppression of planting this good tobacco for the coming years.

I am reminded of a conversation between a French peasant and an American tourist in France: In his travels the tourist came across the French peasant, who was patiently plowing his field with the help of an ox and an old time wooden plow. The tourist was greatly astonished at this primitive form of plowing the field, and said as much to the peasant, who replied: “France consumes all the wheat produced in this country and in its colonies. While there is one bushel left, France will not purchase from any other country. We, therefore, sell the bushel for \$1.50, while the United States with all the machineries

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plowing the fields, cutting and handing the wheat out in bushels, have had to sell as low as 50¢ per bushel. This has never happened in France.”

I do not wish to be interpreted, however, that I am averse to all forms of machineries. I realize the great step forward that has been taken by means of them. Most machineries have bettered the condition of the people, but others have proven detrimental.

Many of my old friends are today in desperate means, and whenever I meet them I stand them a cup of coffee, a sandwich or any other thing. Many are the times that they come to my office, and I immediately dig into my pocket and hand them out a dollar.

I am earning only a small salary, yet I manage to save whatever I can. Every month I send something to my brother in Connecticut as he has been suffering from the stomach for many years.

What salary I earn at the Spanish Club is paid me as bookkeeper, not as Secretary as no official of the Club receives one cent for his services. They render their services for love of the club, and not because of any pecuniary gain.